

A Brief History of the Bridges Out of Poverty Movement and the Importance of Evaluation

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As you may know, Dr. Ruby Payne's first book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1996), had some critics. Bridges sites are sometimes asked to defend the *Framework* book in light of such critiques. A significant way that Dr. Payne has responded is by revising and expanding *Framework* in 2013 with *A Cognitive Approach* as the subtitle.

The original *Framework* book had served as a springboard for *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities* that Terie Dreussi-Smith and I co-authored with Dr. Payne in 1999. That book didn't undergo the same scrutiny that *Framework* did.

It's important to know that Bridges and all that makes up the Bridges movement has never been studied by or critiqued by any qualified independent person or organization. Bridges has evolved into something much more than a single book or program and should be analyzed and reviewed for what it is. Bridges has grown far beyond the content of *Bridges Out of Poverty*, the book that lends it name to the movement.

There have been some minor outcome studies focused on programs that were designed using Bridges. And there are evaluations and studies of *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World*, another book I wrote that has sparked a related movement. While important and necessary, these studies don't rise to the level of inquiry that this letter addresses.

We, the Bridges writers and consultants, have a responsibility to collect data, provide results, and use that information to improve our work and outcomes. In this letter I describe the data collection and evaluation options that we offer Bridges and Getting Ahead (GA) sites, as well as the evaluations that we have yet to design.

The task of evaluating Bridges work is complicated by the fact that Bridges isn't a *program*. It is a set of constructs, tools, and strategies that grew out of a continuous learning process. Bridges has spread across the country with active sites in more than 40 states—and to six other countries. But before I focus on evaluation, allow me to give you a history of the game changers in the development of our core constructs and the innovations that led to new thinking, programs, and a comprehensive approach to poverty.

Game Changers in the Bridges Movement

The development of the Triple Lens approach:

- In *Bridges Out of Poverty* we wrote about the need for institutional and community change in Chapters 13 and 14, not just changes at the individual level.
- For institutional change we introduced the Client Life Cycle, which has been used effectively by many Bridges sites to change their environments, procedures, programs and policies.

- For organizational change we encouraged sites to move beyond coordination and cooperation to *collaboration* so that our sites could operate above the institutional “silos.”
- In 2000 Jodi Pfarr joined us and we took on a more systemic approach to poverty.
- We embedded what we called the Triple Lens approach into the Certified Bridges Trainer curriculum.
- It became the analytical tool that Bridges communities use to bring about change at the individual, institutional, and community levels—and to change policies.

Engaging people from all classes:

- In 2004 *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World* was published. It became our way of engaging people in poverty and bringing them to the planning and decision making tables in our communities.
- *Getting Ahead* introduced a number of concepts that changed the Bridges:
 - Inequality in income and wealth and economic segregation explains the different environments in which Americans live.
 - The mental models of poverty, middle class and wealth that arise from such segregation were developed by the first groups that helped develop the book.
 - The research continuum that identified four clusters of research on the causes of poverty was introduced. That made it possible to address the causes of poverty and the barriers to upward mobility in a comprehensive way; addressing individual choice and circumstance, community conditions, exploitation, and political and economic structures.
 - The research continuum also made it possible to change the discourse about poverty at the community level and to engage people from all political persuasions. Conservatives who focus on individual choice and responsibility and liberals who focus on systemic change could now see that working on poverty issues need not be an either/or narrative, but a both/and reality instead. Poverty is caused by individual choice and political economic structures and everything in between.
 - In *Getting Ahead* the “tyranny of the moment” was identified, and the Theory of Change for how to escape it was developed. We also learned that people running the institutions and leaders in the community get into the tyranny of the moment too—and that while it’s true that people in poverty need to make changes, it is just as true that people in middle class and wealth also need to make changes. They help identify problems and barriers—and find creative solutions in their own lives and in the community. In many communities GA graduates are serving on committees and sitting on boards. Many are Certified Bridges Trainers, many are in leadership roles of Bridges initiatives, and some are published writers and program developers.
- *Bridges*—both book and workshops—is utilized primarily to engage people who work in institutions, those with middle-class jobs.
- *Bridges to Sustainable Communities*—both book and workshops—is used primarily to engage systems thinkers, leaders from many sectors, and those in wealth. We now have a common language utilized by all classes, sectors, and political persuasions.

Economic-class lens as the analytical tool:

- We started with and still utilize the economic-class lens because it throws the widest net over poverty and topics of income and wealth disparity and access to opportunity.
- Another game changer was when Jodi deepened our understanding of the intersection of poverty and racism, sexism, ageism, and many other “isms.” This honors and validates the other lenses through which poverty can be viewed and analyzed.

The impact of the Bridges Learning Community:

- People in many disciplines and organizations took ownership of Bridges concepts and used them in creative ways that the original writers never could have imagined.
- The first of these champions was Cascade Engineering, a plastics firm in Grand Rapids, Mich. The ways in which the Bridges information was adapted there—and later by Cincinnati Works and other innovators—led to a veritable explosion in workplace solutions.
- Others applied Bridges in the courts, social services, health and healthcare, colleges, faith-based organizations workforce development, community reentry (after incarceration), and banking.
- Individuals who championed these new approaches in their institutions and communities formed local, state, sector, and even nationwide learning communities.
- National Bridges Institutes grew out of their conversations and evolved into annual conferences. The first institute was conducted in Columbus, Ohio, in 2006.
- As the innovators built models out of the core constructs of Bridges, a movement began to grow. The results were reported at the annual conferences and documented in two collections of best practices titled *From Vision to Action*. These articles have inspired faster application of the constructs in various institutions and many communities.
- The latest addition to the learning community is Advancing Bridges, Inc., a non-profit, independent organization that has the goal of expanding Bridges initiatives across the United States.

Covering the span of life:

- The Bridges Continuum spans all stages of life from preconception to retirement. Communities use the continuum to engage all sectors in Bridges work.
- We have found that most sectors can use Bridges to improve their outcomes while improving opportunities for people from poverty.
 - For example, when employers improve their retention rate of new hires from poverty, those people are more likely to get out of poverty.
 - When schools engage parents through Getting Ahead, the parents become more involved at school and their children do better in class. These developments can greatly reduce finger pointing and blaming others for high levels of poverty. Community collaboratives can make better use of the resources they each provide.

Addressing power imbalances:

- Bridges offers concrete mental models of class—and balances that experience with a strength-finding model of internal assets and resources.
- Population health research draws a strong correlation between environment and health behaviors and outcomes. Individual assets may provide protective factors that offset the risk factors. Income inequality and housing segregation by income have created economic classes beset by power imbalances.
- The Bridges lens builds equity in relationships, voice, institutional structures, community social cohesion, and policy.

Building sustainable initiatives and communities:

- In Bridges we are now addressing the driving force of “short-termism” at all levels. When people in poverty, institutions, and communities are in unstable and under-resourced conditions, they tend to behave in ways that are not sustainable. How many times have our communities seen promising programs come and go with a brilliant CEO?

- In Bridges we offer tools to develop the long view, to make plans that reach out 25 years, to build a common language for all sectors to use, and to restructure funding so that it helps people actually get ahead rather than have funding that maintains people in poverty.

Methodology as a game changer:

- *The Bridges invitation to co-create is the engine that has made change possible and has formed the organic learning community that combines ideas from people at every socioeconomic level.* For years it has been growing organically on the principles of attraction to the ideas and local ownership of the concepts—and it has been co-creating new programs and solutions with the learning community.
- This methodology was first identified in the aha! Process Platform for Economic Justice in 2007. The ideas that are put to use have been tested and proven through applications on the ground.

Throughout the last 16 years aha! Process, Inc. has supported the Bridges movement through the publication of books, the development of training and certification programs, management of consulting services, and support for the learning community with web-based education and annual meetings.

The Need for Evaluations, Studies, and Research

The concepts and programs introduced after *Bridges Out of Poverty* was published need to be evaluated by those who developed them and have been using them. It also is necessary that independent studies be done. And, as with everything done in Bridges, it should be a Triple Lens evaluation or study.

Current Getting Ahead evaluation and studies: It's easier to evaluate a single program than a general approach to poverty. Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World is a program; it runs for 16 sessions and is provided to 8–12 people and therefore readily lends itself to study and critique.

We offer and strongly recommend that Getting Ahead sites in communities, correctional facilities, and colleges use the evaluation tools offered here. These tools include a pre/post evaluation, data on the change in stability and resource development, return on investment, and model fidelity.

The pre/post evaluation provided by St. Joseph County (Ind.) Bridges Out of Poverty Initiative evaluates the Getting Ahead experience. It also includes an evaluation of the delivery of the Getting Ahead program.

Evaluations done by MPOWR and Charity Tracker measure the growth in the stability and resources of GA graduates. Both providers also provide return-on-investment data and monitor model fidelity on the part of the Getting Ahead sites.

MPOWR and Charity Tracker have unique and powerful tools that each site can use to provide case management and build community collaboratives.

Another provider, Beacon Voice, offers a free mobile application (app) to all GA graduates that they can use to monitor stability and resource development. The app supports social networking so GA grads can build social capital. In the future it will be used to survey GA grads on local, state, and national issues, thus giving them a greater voice in policy matters.

In addition to these evaluation tools, a study of Getting Ahead is being conducted by Beth Wahler, PhD, Indiana University. Her report on the effectiveness of Getting Ahead is to be available in the fall of 2015.

The need for more Bridges evaluation tools: As we grow in the organic Bridges Learning Community and become more focused on systemic and policy changes, we need evaluation tools to match our work.

The Bridges Learning Community has begun the work of developing evaluations for institutional and community change that can be linked to Bridges concepts. Advancing Bridges, which supports the Bridges movement, is playing a key role in this work.

In conclusion, Bridges, and all that it has become, deserves a separate evaluation and review from the original publication of Framework. We encourage evaluation of our work and suggest that evaluators look at the whole body of work including the following books.

List should include:

Bridges to Sustainable Communities

Bridges to Health and Healthcare

Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World

Facilitator Notes for GA

Getting Ahead while Getting Out and the USER GUIDE - because of the reentry model